Calibrations of Latitude
CALIBRATIONS
OF LATITUDE

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I.

On a sunny Wednesday morning in early May, rigorous of mind and sound of body in spite of advancing years, Sir Joseph Pernican set forth on his quest. He felt, in addition to confidence, a provocative unease. The familiar man who had provided his instruction had signified that the clues he would find on his way would take unexpected guises; divining them would depend on his accepting them attentively and without prejudice. Sir Joseph was sure at least of his starting-point. He had also chosen what impressed him as the most likely (because most eastwards) path. But although he had been informed of the principles that must guide him, he had no certainty as to how those principles should be applied, nor did he know what he was meant to find, except for this: its discovery would provide an explanation, and a definitive one.

As he stepped onto the sidewalk, he turned to the right, thereafter crossing several streets on the way to his first stopping place: a street that once led to a sand pit; a street commemorating yet another Napoleonic general; a market street that despite change still retained an old-fashioned image of its earlier self; bordering a cemetery, a street renamed for a heroic fireman.
He entered a large circular square, which he partially skirted. A crowd of people some distance away was packing itself into a subway entrance. He left behind a temple-like building, whose one remaining function was to serve as gateway to a domain hidden beneath him, a world of cloudy hewed chalk. He did not bother to consider, at the center of the square, a shrunk bronze beast.

Sir Joseph arrived at his first transitional destination: a modern six-story building close to the junction of two narrowly intersecting avenues. It housed offices of the national airline. He wondered whether he had not miscalculated his distance, reassuring himself with the observation that the arc of the square’s perimeter he had traversed was equal to about one third of its circumference. He repressed a slight regret at not having headed somewhat more to the left (to the north). He entered the airline’s passenger agency but noticed nothing remarkable. He approached the information counter, where a very old man stood listening to a young blonde hostess. Standing behind him, Sir Joseph saw that a large, detailed map had been spread out on the glass-topped surface. Completely unfolded, the map would have represented the entire globe, with Italy placed at its center. In the middle of Italy was portrayed the figure of a Roman hero dressed in helmet, breastplate, skirt, and greaves, carrying a short broad-bladed sword, identified by a scroll as Aeneas.

The airline attendant was pointing out either itineraries or distances between northeastern Italian towns; she had drawn freehand lines between Vicenza and Udine as well as between Udine and Venice. The old man uttered no word in response to her remarks, only an occasional thin
wheeze. When she had apparently finished, he abruptly drew a pistol from his pocket and began waving it towards France and southern Germany. Dreading the consequences not only to the young woman but to his inquiry, Sir Joseph at once requested she pay no further attention to her interlocutor and speak to him instead. The woman looked at him in astonishment. Sir Joseph then saw that what the old man held in his hand was not a pistol but a combined compass and protractor, a sight that encouraged him greatly: in his circumstances, the instrument made perfect sense.

He left the agency forthwith, superstitiously going round twice through the revolving door. He decided that the lines inscribed by the attendant on the map confirmed his general, if not exact, choice of direction. But where, he asked himself, might he find a sign of the complement of the space in which and beyond which he had been instructed to proceed? And what was the coefficient of multiplication?

Emerging, he turned left around the sharp corner into the neighboring avenue, just in time to overtake a pair of slower-moving students, one of whom was saying to the other, "And here we enter a neighborhood of hospitals and focal jails."
II.

Staying on the left-hand sidewalk for no reason except that it paralleled his thoughts, he made his way down the avenue once known as the “lower way,” past the lost château at the extremity of things, along the street of astronomers, stopping only briefly at the Hôtel de l'Europe, where he had once stayed as a young man. Through its glass entrance door sunlight penetrated the dark interior. He stepped inside: the painting had not budged. How could they still take such risks? He summarily refreshed his memory of Millet’s “Peasant’s Tomb”, a farm landscape with an eloquent stub of a stake marking the burial place of the title. Sir Joseph hastened on.

He came to another wide thoroughfare, it too once a Roman road. His progress was halted by a crowd of tourists waiting outside a gate that opened onto the grounds of a handsome eighteen-century mansion. He had decided to cross the street to avoid the gathering when, reviewing his notes, he learned that he had reached his second stop. He waited: soon a guardian appeared and opened the gate, not allowing the visitors to pass, however, until he had delivered a few introductory remarks. Those entering, he said, were aware that the main object of their
visit was the collection of embossed silver exhibited in the house. He nevertheless recommended their taking particular notice on their way in of another, less reputed attraction: an early nineteenth-century anthill, whose conservation had been a condition laid down by the last hereditary owner for the bequest of his property to the state. The administration had accepted the stipulation, provided one of their own was respected: the neighborhood would be protected from a proliferation of ants by maintaining a ring of seventeen doodlebugs around the base of the anthill, whose inhabitants would have their nourishment guaranteed by their public owners. These provisions were readily agreed upon.

After the guardian and his flock had disappeared amid the abundant greenery of the park, Sir Joseph pursued his way. He believed he had understood the lesson of what he had just witnessed: he must confine himself to the zone of his undertaking and abandon all regret in regard to possibilities not chosen. But where was the promised reflection of that zone to be found? He imagined an inverted cone penetrating the earth underneath the anthill’s settled hump.
III.

Sir Joseph crossed a boulevard thronged with faces of protest and thought of the fields of vine, sainfoin, and lucerne grass that had once stretched beyond it. He passed close behind the great church but avoided entering it, out of fear of its legendary “spirit pumps,” which reputedly still worked their unnerving effect on visitors, of whom, he noticed, many were pushing their way inside through a lateral door. Did they, any better than he, understand the motto of the monks whose domain this once was: “Those who water heaven will hate its fruits”? Why did these words frighten him? Did a spirit pump empty the believer of the “water” which he might use to irrigate the heavenly fields? He shivered inwardly in childish shame at his bodily fluids, urine and seed. Didn’t he hope, so late in his life, to reap whatever fruits awaited him once he reached his goal?

In the meantime, his next goal proved disappointing: nothing was there. He could only perceive unmanifest relics of the past, from which the female deaf-mutes and beneficiaries of evangelical charity had long since vanished. Might Miss MacDonald still be found in the office of the Buddhist grammarian? It lay outside his path;
he recalled the lesson of the anthill. One small street displayed a house bridging its entrance, with a grating (now open) underneath. The street was empty, its façades were devoid of meaning to him. He again walked round the intersection.

In the nearest café Sir Joseph ordered a coffee with hot milk. The barman was polite and indifferent. A couple standing next to him began arguing about a recent development in the neighborhood. Sir Joseph could not grasp what it was and requested they explain. Both man and woman then began recounting their versions simultaneously. Sir Joseph succeeded in deciphering these facts: a new breed of cockroaches had appeared in certain adjacent streets; the cockroaches left trails of slime that, when they came into contact with any inorganic chemical (like those in all insecticides), ignited with a low-intensity, long-burning flame; thus far damage had been minor, but clearly a huge potential danger existed. The woman claimed to have witnessed the phenomenon in action, the man insisted it must have been due to other causes, such as the coincidental proximity of cockroaches and particularly inflammable substances. The barman declined to take sides in the discussion. Sir Joseph thanked them for the information before leaving.

On the sidewalk a scruffy man handed him a yellow leaflet written in Portuguese. Sir Joseph perused it rapidly, then tossed the crumpled sheet in the gutter. From its thousand words he had salvaged no more than one capital C under which a cedilla had been exaggerated into the likeness of a viper.
He could make nothing of this, or of anything else. He felt disappointed, abandoned, and confused like, he thought, the blank \( e \) of an unaccented syllable spoken by someone else. He then saw the point. He had been given an exemplary lesson, a preparatory one, no doubt, but exemplary all the same. He had been first warned, and now convincingly taught: situations are to be accepted “without prejudice.”

Sir Joseph reflected on the tools at his disposal. The ratio of two to one had evidently worked as a measure of the distance between his stations. But he still could not deduce the multiplicand on which 1.7320 must operate; nor could he any longer permit himself to speculate on the nature of that “other half” that would supply whatever was wanting from this present angulation.
He came to a partly ruined chapel. Its yard was forbiddingly enclosed by a nine-foot wall whose gates were bricked up. Across one of them an inscription read:

_The King forbids that God should do Miracles here for me and you._

Inside the chapel he found, as he hoped, a pamphlet relating its history.

The pamphlet declared (summarizing Larrey's thesis) that the persecution of the Jansenists originated at a time long before Clement XI. Its basis was the favor shown by Pius IV to the rural constituency of the church to the detriment of its restless urban elements. It was as a result of this attitude that the Jansenists were later attacked: the cause was thus political rather than purely doctrinal. The consequences are well known: Clement XI's bull _Unigenitus_; the protests it aroused in the French church and university; the support it received from Louis XIV and Madame de Maintenon, which led to 20,000 arrests, to the systematic refusal of the sacraments to Jansenists, to the proclamation in 1730 that the bull _Unigenitus_ was the law
of the land. To counter such persecution, the Jansenist congregations created a secret fund known as “Perec’s Box” (*la boîte à Perec*), which helped them survive this difficult period and eventually, in alliance with the Philosophers, drive the Jesuits, their chief enemies, out of France.

In 1727 a celebrated Jansenist, Pascal de Frangy, having died of self-inflicted mortifications, was buried in a common grave in the yard of the now-ruined chapel. Soon afterwards, the black marble slab placed as a memorial over the grave became a much-frequented meeting-place for his friends and admirers and, subsequently, the scene of a veritable cult. Legends sprang up about the grave, and there was much talk of miracles occurring there. An extraordinary fervor came to animate the graveyard visitors. Fits accompanied by visions were frequent; and in order to induce such propitious states, those seeking inspiration, who were mostly women, resorted to extravagant acts. They dug out the ground under the slab in order to devour it; they asked vigorous lads called “relievers” to pinch and twist their breasts and trample on their limbs. Witnesses report their being beaten with logs, meanwhile crying out, “Oh, how good this is! What good it does me! Brother, if you can endure it, I beg you not to stop!” They swallowed red-hot coals and bound bibles, had fifty-pound blocks dropped on them from a considerable height, were nailed to a cross, or had their tongues pierced.

The royal police did not intervene for several years; at last, in 1732, they built a high wall around the graveyard and sealed its entrances, which were placed under permanent guard. It was at this time that the couplet
V.

It was still in some despondency that Sir Joseph traversed the avenues of the botanical gardens, among towering trees, one of which was labeled with its botanical name and date of planting. He hurried through the zoo, where raucous undisciplined clusters of children ("fit for the stables," Sir Joseph thought) waited to be led in among monkeys and tigers. He came to the bank of the river. Here kings and courtesans had bathed naked centuries ago. He at once guessed it was not for such history that he was here, but for a half-forgotten memory of his own, one from his days as a young man. The memory did not concern him directly; indeed it had come back to him seemingly by chance.

Not far to his left lay a river port, one principally used in earlier years for the commerce of wine. A Chinese wood-dealer, then of an age that in most men would recommend retirement and repose, availed himself of the port for the delivery at an exceptionally low price of timber rare or seasoned: the reason being that no duty had ever been paid on it. The unloading of such contraband had necessarily to be effected as quickly and secretly as possible. It was therefore carried out in the very first
glimmer of daylight by a few loyal, expert handlers. The Chinaman also relied on an ingenious method he had contrived to ensure a rapid getaway, should the need arise. During the unloadings, rather than moor his barge to the wharf, he dropped a special stern anchor ten yards aft of his barge and (depending on the strength of the current) five to twelve yards distant from the bank. It was the current itself, by pivoting the barge at a calculated angle, that then maintained it in place against the quay. In case of discovery by the fiscal police, one blow of the hammer was enough to spring the anchor-chain from its capstan as soon as the barge had swung out into the river to initiate its escape—a far swifter mode of departure than one requiring a double disengagement of ropes from bollards.

The Chinaman had never had to put his subterfuge to the test. But he never abandoned it, for a simple reason: it made him feel inordinately proud. He was equally proud of only one other thing in his life, and that was his wife. He had married her fifty years before, when she was a mere fourteen, and she had never ceased bringing him pleasure and happiness. Unfortunately he was not only proud of her but obsessively jealous, a sentiment that might have been expected to lessen as the couple aged but that on the contrary had only grown in intensity, to such an extent that he first resorted during his absences to confining her to their house, then to their bedroom, last of all imprisoning her in a contraption of his own devising, a five-foot box divided lengthwise, between whose halves she was gently but firmly enclosed from neck to ankle. It is true that the box was a marvel of comfort, lined, for instance, with velvet-covered padding; it is also true that it was only used
when her husband left her for a few hours—he could not bear longer separations and would never think of taking one of his river journeys without her. But it is no less true that his wife found this treatment cruel and unbearably humiliating. When years of entreaty had brought no change, she at last fell back on a somewhat desperate expedient to put an end to it.

She one day announced to her husband that unless he dispensed with his box she would lay on him a curse preserved in her family since the Shang Dynasty. The effect of the curse would be to destroy his barge. He only laughed at her. She pronounced the curse and repeated it day after day, week after week. Not unreasonably, he became somewhat irritated and no less incredulous. The two then left together for a coastal port to pick up a consignment of teak.

During this time the wife had put their stay in the city to good use. With the collaboration of her son, sympathetic to her plight, she succeeded in taking measurements of the special anchor, in having a plaster mould of it made, and finally in having it cast in solid sugar weighted with a quantity of small lead balls. Painted a convincing rust-flecked black, the replica was smuggled aboard the barge at the last stop before the city and substituted for the original. When they had docked in the capital, having made sure her husband was safely ashore, the wife for the last time repeated her curse in ringing tones. Once again her husband fretfully shrugged off her words. She soon had the heady albeit mixed pleasure of watching their beloved barge suddenly bump against the craft moored ahead of it before gyrating out into the river, where in the first rays of
the nascent day she, and he, saw it smash tremendously against a stone pier of the first bridge downstream.

The wood merchant agreed to get rid of the vicious box and end every form of confinement, provided his wife swear to never again exercise a Shang curse against him and, as well, to solemnly renew their marriage vows.

Sir Joseph readily drew a moral: without trust, he would never arrive at his goal.

Along the embankment an avenue ran east—another, more distant allusion to a definitive past.
VI.

He detoured across the river over an irrelevant bridge, crossed the end of a boulevard, continued over a canal on a footway named after it, something that seemed to favor thought and progress (but had he shown himself capable of thought? could his walking be considered progress?); then, breasting two streams of cars, Sir Joseph found himself on rue Jésus-Christ. He disliked the portentousness of the name and the brevity of the street. He entered it all the same, advanced a few yards, and stopped by a red-granite monument on its right-hand sidewalk; a three-foot-high irregular solid whose smooth rounded sides sloped up to a bent tip, a tip drooping as if in dejection. An inscription running around the base had been, save for a few separate letters, clumsily chipped off, as had an ornament at its peak.

Having observed Sir Joseph’s bemusement, a tailor stepped from his shop to speak to him. He said that the stone had been erected here in 1869, the year when the street had been opened, its name chosen in homage to a recently published biography of Our Lord by Napoleon III. During the inauguration of the street, the Emperor had noticed a swan on the waters of the canal; dispatching an
aide to the nearest bakery for a pound of stale bread, he left his entourage in the midst of the ceremony to briefly nourish the majestic fowl. During the following months Napoleon several times returned to indulge a similar fancy. At such times he would lie face down on the edge of the embankment, stretched on a thick embroidered towel laid out for this purpose by an attendant, with a crust-filled basket at his side from which he hopefully tossed morsels into the stagnant canal; no swan ever returned, except once, when a male bird flew overhead, proceeding from the river towards some unknown destination. At its sight the Emperor was heard to exclaim, "O my swan, my swan!" It seems that, notwithstanding their outcome, these excursions distracted him from the ever-increasing pain brought on by politics and calculi.

Sir Joseph thanked the tailor. Alone, he wondered if this clearly predestined information meant he should relinquish his own calculations, such as multiplication and the comparison of angles, as well as his reflections on the possible forms of a likeness that would complete the reality he merely perceived. What might have happened to him on the other side of the canal, or one street up? Why had he begun feeling a new sort of melancholy? In terms of his exploration, were his feelings of any consequence or merely impediments to be ignored and even suppressed?
VII.

Now on the fourth and last of the longer legs of his journey, he passed the obliterated site of an author’s theater and crossed one street where he had once eaten veau Marengo, another named for a transvestite gardener, a third famous for its trolls.

Having carefully reckoned the distance he must go, Sir Joseph was surprised on his arrival to find himself in yet another little street where nothing attracted his eye or mind. As earlier, he entered the café closest by. A plump, smiling woman in late middle-age sat behind the cash register; a youth tended the bar; in front of it, five men of strikingly varied ages and dress stood affably passing around a stemmed glass containing at least a pint of clear liquid the color of cherry candy. Sir Joseph had no sooner taken a place next to them than one, a florid ill-shaven man in his forties, clad in rough, worn corduroy and laced knee-boots, tipped the oversized wine glass between his lips and emptied it. This act provoked the immediate disapproval of all and the fury of some. One man, shaking his fist in the offender’s astonished face as he railed against him, looked ready to come to blows. Peace was restored by the plump cashier. She quickly refilled a second large glass while
admonishing the irate customer: he should remember that the fellow was freshly arrived from Sardinia, had a limited acquaintance with their language, and had certainly failed to understand their drinking rule when it had been expounded to him.

Turning to Sir Joseph, plainly bewildered at what had taken place, the woman forthwith gave him a brief explanation. The great hospital at the center of their neighborhood bore the name of the monastery in which it had originated, whose monks followed the rule of Saint Bernard. Among the tradesmen of the vicinity this rule had survived in various practices more or less faithful to its spirit. In her café, she said, the most recent of an unbroken line of bistros going back to the thirteenth century, the monkish rule was reflected in the custom Sir Joseph had seen enacted: a large glass of white wine mixed with redcurrant liqueur was passed from one drinker to the next, each taking a swallow in turn until the glass was nearly empty, at which point it was either refilled or set aside. It was considered a kind of sacrilege to drink the last of its contents as the Sardinian had unwittingly done.

Sir Joseph thanked the good-natured woman for the information and politely asked if her family's ownership of the café also originated in the middle ages. She shook her head, explaining that she had acquired the lease only ten years before, at great expense: because of the famous tradition associated with it, the café, in spite of its humble air, attracted the richest and most distinguished customers in that section of town. She had been able to pay the necessary price only through her daughter's talent and affection. A coloratura singer of great virtuosity, that
young woman had one evening, at a reception given by the Marquis de Batz, been challenged by Charles Bergman, a wealthy diamond merchant and notorious gambler, to sing Constanza's "Martern aller Arten" a whole tone higher than written, offering against the unlikely exploit an eight-carat cut blue diamond of perfect water. The singer said that she would accept the challenge if the jeweler subsequently renewed his gage for each of the four superior semitones. By the end of the evening she had performed the aria five times, ultimately reaching an unimaginable b-flat above high c. Charles Bergman kept his word and thus gave the daughter an opportunity to manifest her filial devotion: delivered on the following day, the stones were then presented by the daughter to her astonished mother, who refused all but one; advantageously sold, it had brought her possession of the prestigious café.

When, comforted with a sandwich and another coffee, he went out onto the street, Sir Joseph turned to the left. He at once realized his mistake, sensing that it had been anything but fortuitous: it pointed to an unconscious awareness on his part that he had entered a new realm, that all his careful reckonings had been meant to lead him here so that he could turn left on a narrow sidewalk in a drab street. He could now begin to see where he was. The new realm was the exact image, greatly reduced, of the one along which he had maneuvered through the day; within it surely was a yet smaller space, and that would be his next and final goal. The complementarity he had so hopelessly sought lay not beyond, but within. He started on his last lap, with an eagerness and anxiety so intense that to distract.
himself he, Sir Joseph Pernican, actually started whistling Constanza’s air loudly as he walked.
VIII.

As he turned right off the thoroughfare onto a narrow street that bore slightly to the left and whose far end he could not clearly distinguish, Sir Joseph was anything but surprised to discover where his final destination lay. The little street was charming, although he could not immediately tell why. To the left were conventional middle-class apartment buildings, to the right older and smaller houses with nondescript façades and treeless courtyards behind them visible through occasional gratings. All too soon he realized what sensation had agreeably overcome him—it was a sensation of familiarity—and as he did so it soured into a kind of despair. He had been mercilessly trapped.

The street ended not in the narrow angle he expected but in an L-shaped turn to the left, and it was when he saw it that he knew exactly where he had arrived. On the third floor of one of the small old houses, thirty years before, he had lived—he had failed to live—the passion of his life. It had been a passion so furious he had been frightened by it, and after a few months he had abandoned his lover. She was a dancer; her body was small, supple, strong, and smooth; her own passion expressed itself with
knowledgeable ardor. He had fled. More exactly, he had by his boorishness provoked her into making him flee. He had not pursued her, won her, abducted her from her house, or guarded her from the attentions of others; he had not had to relinquish her through any force of circumstance. He had followed her and lain down with her and her agile loins, then allowed himself through willful negligence to be sent away. Now, choking helplessly at this wildest of all deaths, covering his faculties in the black wax of night, he succumbed to a rage of remorse.

Some clambering vine, clematis or wistaria, sprawled among the windows of the housefront. He crossed the street and seized its thick stem in both hands, shaking it as if to wrench it from the wall and its diminutive plot of earth. Leaves and twigs rattled against mortared stones. She opened the window to see what was happening. She had aged very little. She did not recognize him, using the formal pronoun of address when she asked him what he was doing. He turned away without an answer and rounded the corner onto a busy, tree-lined avenue.

He paid no more attention to where he went. At last he came to a little park and sat down on one of its green benches. Grass had grown up unmown between plane trees and horse chestnuts past their flowering. He gazed stupidly in front of him.

Out of the grass a lark rose with singular verticality and speed high into the air, high above the trees, a stationary flutter in the afternoon sunlight.

Watching the bird, Sir Joseph shook his head, then laughed out loud. He stood up and walked out of the park, as he did so dropping his packet of documents into a trash
can. He kept his map as souvenir, although he feared that neither then nor thereafter would he be able to say whether it was meant to recall the lark's sudden ascent or its golden hovering.
Harry Mathews' books include the novels *The Conversions, Tlooth, The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium, Cigarettes,* and *The Journalist.* He has also published short fiction, including *Country Cooking and Other Stories;* a selection of longer prose pieces, *The Way Home,* that includes works of fiction, an autobiography, an essay on the Oulipo, and a memoir of Georges Perec; poetry, including *A Mid-Season Sky, Poems 1954-1991;* criticism; and translations of works by Georges Perec, Raymond Roussel, Georges Bataille, and others. With Alastair Brotchie, he compiled and edited *Oulipo Compendium,* the first comprehensive survey of the group.
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Harry Matthews